INTERVIEWEE: RUTH WHEELER

INTERVIEWER: Patricia Young

SUBJECT:

DATE: 23 February 1981

TRANSCRIBER: Linda A. Jantzen

PY: This is an interview with Mrs. Ruth Wheeler for the Historical Society of Palm Desert Oral History Project on February 23, 1981, Monday, at ten o'clock in the morning at her home in Smoketree Ranch in Palm Springs.

Okay. Let's just start talking in terms of what was Mr. McCumber's background, where was he from?

RW: He was from Pasadena. And I believe he was a law student, but he went into real estate and insurance in Pasadena. And there was a next door neighbor, a Mr. Blankenworth.

PY: That's good enough. Let's continue then with what his background was, where he was from, Mr. Blankenworth.

RW: Oh, Mr. Blankenworth was born in Pasadena, one of the few men of his age I ever knew who wasn't born somewhere else and had come to Pasadena. And he was the

first child to be christened in Episcopal Diocese in Pasadena at All Saints Church. And his family lived off Avenue and his home, where he was born and raised, has become a heritage house on Marcum Place, Pasadena. And his family were early settlers from Milwaukee. And there was one older brother who was born in Milwaukee, and George and David was his younger brother. He was born in Pasadena, too. And he was educated in public school. And at high school age he went to, attended Troop Polytechny Institute. And that was founded by a man by the name of Troop. No H in it, T-R-O-O-P, and it later became Cal Tech. And the younger grades became Polytechnic School in Pasadena which is still going, as well as Cal Tech. He graduated and went into the Navy at the time of World War I and was First Lieutenant. But he spent his time in San Diego and San Francisco, Bay District. And later through that training he had and his education at Cal Tech, when they were short of professors and hurrying people into the war, and especially Cal Tech came into the Navy, he taught freely, free of charge, once a week and later twice a week astronomy for the Cal Tech men so they could get in a little faster than

they would if they just had their regular classes. And he quite an outstanding citizen of Pasadena and in real estate. And he later became interested in outside development. Otherwise, he was in business properties in Pasadena.

PY: Well, actually did he even find out about the desert?

RW: Well, he loved it. He used to come down there. A lot of people did. And it was quite a trip, I guess. But he came down as a really a teenager, or early twenty, his own age of twenty. And would hike around here in the mountains. And he'd come down in a, not like a station wagon, but more or less of a, not with horses, but it was an early, like a small van, express wagon they called them. And they'd shoot down here, hunt. And then he loved the sunshine, more than Pasadena had. And that's when he became interested and got Mr. McCumber interested, not in Smoketree, but, and Smoketree was his first development. And then a little area in Rancho Mirage. And I had known him years before, and when I was a widow in 1932, following that, why we went out together and in June of 1935 we were married. And that spring before I came down, all day trips, and he was looking at property in Rancho Mirage and getting

boundary lines, and several times Mr. McCumber came with us and we'd bring a picnic lunch. And then after we were married, we started in July of thirty-five, Rancho Mirage building and our house was on Sahara Road. And he and Mr. McCumber laid out, not as engineers, but with engineers, I guess, laid out the roads, although they weren't graded right away. And a man by the name of Ernest Behr, B-E-H-R, was the man that stayed down here. He was a salesman, but you know you had to have someone, workmen to see everything was going all right. We came down, oh, once or twice a week there while we were building. And they put up the real estate office, which later became many other things. And last I heard of it, why I carried artificial flowers there. And I was at that office sitting on the steps one day, the place had not been named, and we were all three of us thinking, Mr. McCumber, Mr. Blankenhorn, that thought what would be a good name and the word rancho was not at all common then, and I came up with many ideas, but one that they seemed to like, in naming it Rancho Mirage, thinking of the early day of the people coming across the desert and having the mirage ever ahead. And they thought that was fine.

Little did we know that would ever be incorporated as a city and the home of presidents and Eisenhower Medical Center. It seemed possible. And unfortunately it really was started at the wrong time in the world's history because it was so close to World War II. And our second home we built, we lived in each one, was on Anza Road right, post office, where it looks out on post office, someone has made it into a motel. And by using your second sights, you can find, pick out the house which was adorable. And I sort of liked it even better, not the location, even better than the first house. It was a little more practical. But now it just adds much to Rancho Mirage. And had a very poor road through there. Hundred and eleven had never been heard of. And in fact all the road down from Pasadena was only two lane. And you came to a narrow spot as you come up the hill for Redlands, that was really almost treacherous because it was not paved. You got water and California salt mixed, you would get into trouble. And there's no planting around Rancho Mirage. We planted a few blocks, but not many. And the next house built, we really sold a lot to was a Mr. Prouty. At that time he was head of the Metropolitan

Insurance Company, life insurance company, of New York, for the Los Angeles territory. And he had a little boy who had asthma and he had been advised to take him to the doctor. So that house was hurried along and they used it for years. It wasn't for sale. And one of our second, I think second or third sales was to Henry Morgan. And he built this most attractive Mexican house and his architect used very good sense. He owned the land and all and it was really a gem. And he, Mr. Morgan, adored it and so did his wife and spent every moment he could away from the screen to be there. And he was very neighborly. And then a mistaken house was built. They built it between the Morgan house and our house to I think they were widows or old maids, anyway two women who lived alone. And they didn't want them to be too close to the desert floor, so they had steps leading up to the front porch which didn't, we hadn't right rules or they wouldn't have been able to do that. And little by little, of course, you couldn't buy anything down there. And Palm Desert was just a spot on the highway, nothing there at all. And no one thought of staying there year round or even all year except the Prouty family

with this little boy.

PY: I wanted to ask you where actually was the Prouty house? Was it on Sahara?

RW: Yes, on the corner of Sahara. We were inside one lot and Proutys had whatever we sold at that time was a piece, a parcel. I think ours was about a hundred feet, and I think theirs was about the same. And it was an attractive house. I don't think it was as attractive as ours. And we had help from and Van Pelt who built the older-type houses at Smoketree Ranch. You could mention that. And they were the leading architects, young architects, lived to a ripe old age, and they had this idea, the type roofs. They're all over America now. You know what I mean. One part high, then a quick drop. Now they put stairways up and those two-story awful condominiums. But then it was very nice because you've got a pretty slope in your, in our living room in Sahara house. All this in between was light blue and the beams were white. Then we had a pale blue, well, not like a bedroom rug, but it was really most attractive, and furnished it in wicker. That's when you get wicker upholstered. It had phases like it's having now. And we had painted

beds. I wonder, do you suppose they're still there. They weren't from Mexico, but they were sort of a pale yellow background with wildflowers on the headboard, low headboard, I mean low foot board. It was really artistic, but I did do it. And I'm not an interior decorator.

PY: Tell me about how you got all the furniture. That was interesting.

RW: Well, we got it right, and when we decided to, is that on now?

PY: Yes.

RW: When we decided this house was about finished, we wanted to furnish it quickly. We were living at 1202 Arden Road in Pasadena. We made an appointment with Barker Bros. by the phone to give us one highly intelligent individial who could take us all over the store. We were going to furnish the house complete. And he later said, if he'd known it was going to be so completely, he would have used it in an ad, but he was so overcome, he never done that before. We hadn't either. And I made out about three legal size sheets of paper and different sections of what we would have to have and the number and the bedding, blankets, sheets, international silver, dishes, rugs, and we had the room

sizes, of course, ahead of time. We weren't vague about that, even to curtains. And you could buy, that was about the earliest you could buy a pretty chintz curtain that was lined. And we had our pillows up. And that was a pretty effect, too, they were hanging from rings. But we bought, he sent the right number of rings, of course, that was in the drapery department. He led us around, and we were in there by nine thirty and we didn't leave the store until quarter of five. And we stopped long enough to have lunch across the street at Robinson's and came back. And you don't really realize how many things go into a house until you start. Bought lamps and not any literature in the way of books or wood pile yet. And our beds, we had two very nicely furnished bedrooms with a and a bureau in each room and twin beds. And the beds had a pale yellow background in one room with flowers in Spanish blue, deeper blue, and red. We didn't have any pictures on the wall. And the other one was done in three shades of sort of brown and yellow, but painted furniture. It was already painted, complete set. And they weren't too expensive for that day and age. They were made for country cottages, I think, the

sign said. And you don't realize in the kitchen department how many things you'll need before you can even get a meal. And they've told us, I think this was a Tuesday we were in there, and they told us a truck went down once a week on Thursday and it went way to El Central. And I guess it took one individual truck, as I remember, for our place. I don't think it went any further. And I had a friend from Tacoma visiting us, was a very good little worker, and so the two of us were ready when they got down there, I guess about eleven o'clock. And the workmen were nice, they placed the furniture, of course. And set up the beds. And my friend and I worked like beavers. We had the shelves all cleaned. And meantime we'd put paper on the shelves that morning while we were waiting for the truck. We had that ready which I'd brought home with him from Barker's. And we were all set to go, little too exhausted to have a meal, but we didn't have any food in the house. And we came into Palm Springs to dinner, the Desert Inn. And we used the fresh towels to take our first baths there, and we looked rather presentable when we started for town. But we slept very well that night, I would say. And we had to come

in again for breakfast in the morning because, and then is when we started on the grocery list. But I've never been much of a cook and she was worse than I, so we didn't overdo on the cooking end, the week we were really there getting things a little more in order. And we sold that house in about four months' time to this Mr. and Mrs. Armstrong who had bought this date ranch. And they were from New York. And if I ever saw two people who knew less about a desert or a type of living they were in. He's supposed to have had tuberculosis, although he looked rather well. And they bought, before they ever left New York, things that you would wear to Mexico or Arizona. They rode horses. I don't think they'd ever seen a horse in New York. They were right off Fifth Avenue. And she was so homesick, and they were across the wash. And they had no more than gotten in there, moved in, than they had a rain. Not a bad one, but enough so they couldn't get across the wash. In those days, I don't know where you could go across because there were no bridges anywhere. You had to wait. And she said she could not stay out there. And so they came in and got acquainted with us. They were really very delightful,

a little bit older than we were. And they came across there every chance they had. And then they said, oh, why did we get a house over here? Well, they said, my husband said, there weren't any homes here when you bought your ranch. I think they'd been there about nine or ten months. And they'd gotten a little house, came with their ranch. I never really did see it. And by January or February, I guess, they bought our house. And we, in the meantime, had started another one on Anza Road. And I do remember those two streets there because I say Mr. McCumber and Mr. Blankenhorn named them different streets. And he had a clever idea when he was laying out Smoketree because he made two through roads, a ranch road and a colony road. The others were a block or two blocks long. And so we looked ahead. There would never be any racing traffic through. I think he should have done the same at Rancho Mirage, not be able to go straight ahead because you can't ever see a place when you do that. It's dangerous, as well, residential section because just every two blocks is a jog and you go to your right or left two blocks. And it seems like you have to hunt for something, seems like curved streets where

you keep going around and meet yourself on the third curve or something. And but out there he expected to sell, expected the whole ranch go so differently. They had a zone for business, and it just looked like zoning the sky, so improbable to me. I wasn't a believer that he was. And then with the war coming, that made it most difficult. No one could have gasoline to get down from many of these cities for a weekend place. We were really more or less selling weekend places because remember air conditioning hadn't even been thought of. And very few people but the Indians stayed in the summertime. Armstrongs didn't, I don't know where they went, but they were gone. And they had a hard time with help, too, on their date palms. As I said before, they had no idea how to raise them. And eventually, I think, they moved back east. I don't know. I lost track of them. But he tried to get a zoning. No one ever heard of zoning out there. They thought that was unnecessary. We expected a little market, something that way. And the way we did get food, we found out an old man that came by twice a week long before the, but he was headed really, from way down from El Central, he had a little truck, Mexican.

And he came into the Palm Springs. But after we got a few houses there, he didn't go beyond that. We could count for his delicious fresh vegetables. Oh, they were good. They were so absolutely fresh, and he was so nice. And one time we had a party down there from Pasadena, about five or six, and a group we had played poker with years in Pasadena. And the wildest thing we did was play poker. And we had all the windows open one night and this game was progressing. And there was one lot had been sold below us. This one where the Anza Road house. And I've forgotten the woman's name, but she lived alone there with a little fox terrier. And she, next morning, she came over out in front there and she said, did you hear those coyotes? I said, those weren't coyotes, those were our guests laughing when they won a pot. It was so soundless out there. And we had to watch it, not take any small animals down there because their life wasn't worth anything unless you kept them in the house. The coyotes at night were really on the rampage. And when I see that post office today and think you couldn't mail letters except at the Palm Springs or down at Indio, they had a spot on the highway. And tourists got rather, they took their choice of climbing

off there or going up to Whitewater, riding back. And my first trip to the desert was way back in twenty-three when I came down on doctor's office from Tacoma with I had contracted tuberculosis. I went to the Desert Inn. In twenty-three there were two telephones in the town. One at Desert Inn, and the other one at a garage up the street. Very few people drove their own cars in those days. And the building still stands opposite the Beachcomber, a white building, boarded up. There was a gas station down below. And that's where, they had about twenty-some bedrooms up there, and there was a premium for people's chauffeurs to stay. And, I don't know where they got their food, but that's where they slept. And the building still stands. It's a two-story building with a long wing and a balcony and rooms opening on the balcony. But no one lives there. Right near El Mirador.

PY: When did you get phones in Rancho Mirage?

RW: When did I get what?

PY: Phones, telephone at Rancho Mirage.

RW: I don't know. We didn't have one out there when, up to the time we sold it. We did have one at the office, about, must have been about 1940. Well, when the army

came in, I think that's really when we had to have many phones. But I think we had one. I know we did. And it wasn't a dial phone, but we had one. I think we went through Indio. Wouldn't be certain about that because it wasn't very good connection and we only used it for special business or something. We didn't have them in the houses. I never had one out there in the house. But when Mr. Blankenhorn tragically died following a brain tumor operation which was malignant, in the spring of forty-three, and we were getting into the war and the government wanted the desert for training Patton's troops. And General Patton himself, I believe, had a house at the south end of Palm Springs. I couldn't tell you where. But we were, we had no choice. There were about ten houses then in Rancho Mirage. I mean, nice houses, homes. And I was told a month or so after Mr. Blankenhorn died that my house would be made ready for a General Pick. And so I was able to get gasoline with that order, you see. And I came down, and that was another big day because I had taken out some things, seeing this war was coming. I didn't know we were going to be in battle there, but I didn't know when I'd be able to get back. You couldn't rent

the house; it was impossible. You couldn't get the gasoline or anyone to come to see you. And you were just marooned. And that's where the sales were at least two or three, four years. And General Pick lived there. And they had all their, either up in training out on the desert about where Bermuda Dunes. So people told me. I didn't come back again. But years later I met General Pick after he was retired and he was made chairman of the board at Georgia Pacific when it came to the northwest. And he rented a house in Tacoma and I met him at a dinner party. And I said, you don't know me, we've never seen each other. But I cashed your army checks for quite awhile. And he looked so surprised at that. And I said, you were in my home. In the meantime I'd remarried and was living in Tacoma. And we became fast friends. He had remarried, too. And he lived in Tacoma until he died. He was a delightful person. But we mostly had generals out there. And the troops, of course, were in tents, I suppose, out in that hot desert. But it couldn't be too hot for them because that was what they had to learn how to take.

PY: Do you remember how much they gave you for the rent on

the home?

RW: Well, it was a government check, you see, but countersigned by Pick. And I had a hundred and forty dollars. And that was just pitance as far as the nuisance of the thing. And they left it nicely. In the meantime why Mr. McCumber, his share and my share, we sold it to a well company. I lost track of everything.

PY: You mean you sold the whole development.

RW: Yes, the whole thing. Well, of course, we didn't sell people's individual homes. But all the extra acreage and, oh, a lot of things went with it. And it didn't amount to as much as you think because prices were so low and the country was getting back to order again.

PY: How much did you sell the homes for, for instance, the first one you built?

RW: Well, you'd be surprised! Seventy-four hundred. I don't think we had over five in it. Buildings were pretty cheap then.

PY: Where were the construction workers coming from?

RW: They came locally, mostly from, I mean, of labor. We had this Ernie Behr I told you about, like superintendent, and he superintended these people. See, we built as a company unless we sold a lot and they wanted to build

their own. Then I don't know who they had, they'd have working. But I'd say we were mostly, not itinerates, but Mexicans fairly capable, not just off the highway. And you'd be surprised, not people like now, like hippies, but people working for work with packs on their back. We nearly always could find someone. And they were honest. They weren't going from place to place. They were glad for some food and, of course, being in the desert you didn't take much over your head.

PY: Where did they sleep? Oh, you mean, they just slept . . .

RW: I don't know because we never made anyplace for them. I couldn't tell you that. But I don't think they ever had much of a roof over their head. I don't know whether they came across the border even illegally. But I tell you they were pretty good little, we'd always had a head carpenter that went on every job, every house we built. And he came down from Palm Springs. But he didn't normally live in Palm Springs. He came from around Pomona somewhere. And he loved the country. Randall liked the desert, of course, where he'd go there. Like now I don't know what the country would do without Mexicans. They do the heavy work. They seem to be able to stand heat and live on chile and where our

workmen, no matter how lonely they might be, they weren't unionized then, why they couldn't take the heat in the summer while putting the roofs on and all. The Mexicans can take more heat.

PY: So you were building year round then.

RW: Beg pardon?

PY: You were building year round.

RW: Yes. He was also building at Smoketree when we were there. And he sold it to Mr. Doyle.

PY: Did you use the same, you know, you had Marsten and Van Pelt as the Architects here?

RW: Yes, I believe.

PY: Now did he also use them for the homes he built in Rancho Mirage?

RW: Yes. They were from Pasadena. And Mr. Marsten was a son of the Marsten who had the large, well, still large store in San Diego. And he's the best all department store, carry everything. And they did some of the most beautiful homes in Pasadena. But they were interested in this. It was sort of different for them. And if you driving up Ramon Road in Palm Springs just a little while about two blocks east of Indian Avenue you look to your left there's a double drive there. And you'll

notice the houses on that. They're the same type of houses. Now the city, they deteriorate so terribly, now the city, as I understand a couple of years ago, practically gave them to people for fixing them up. And they look very different now. And painting them right, not adding funny things to them. When those building experiments they were trying out. And it was made to be a very nice residential street. You see, when Palm Springs was developed, the best residential streets were up in the canyon up there. Right at the end of Palm Canyon, be south of Palm Canyon, before it becomes east. And then the second residential district was back of El Mirador, which was not El Mirador then, but that was the second. And the third was Las Palmas, of the, I mean, choice, expensive places.

PY: Yes.

RW: But the first was right down there off of Ramon Road. And those were really a very choice little homes, but no one gave them a thought because for twenty years they deteriorated so terribly.

PY: But Van Pelt and Marsten didn't do those homes.

RW: Yes, they did.

PY: Oh.

RW: They did and come down here just to do things at Smoketree. I don't mean they were living here, but they were commuting back and forth, one or the other one. And you can tell their houses down here. And years later other people copied them and all sorts of funny breakoff, but it made good ventilation. And look at this little house. You never saw twelve inch board like that and grooved used on the inside. It was very attractive. And I imagine they got it for a little less if they'd use the tongue and groove on a narrower board. And they were all for beans. And they figured that where you had that sloping roof you got much more air than you would have say a ten-foot ceiling.

PY: So were they building frame houses then in Rancho Mirage? I mean, there have been certain rules here, I understand, at Smoketree Ranch. For instance, the kinds of things you could plant.

RW: Yes.

PY: And the kinds of buildings you could have.

RW: Yes, at Smoketree you were not allowed to have a, well, of course, no one had a swimming pools in those days, private swimming pools, and I don't think they should

yet because I think it made it very humid. And I think one layout golf courses and you want water, then you should go where the water is. Not held these artificial lights become so smelly when summer comes with algae and everything else. And I don't think the desert was made to have, I think ever a hotel, but in consequence should have a good sized one or a high school, public pool, something like that. But now they have them all over here at Palms and Red Desert. I guess they do at Rancho Mirage. And one of the rules at Rancho Mirage years ago was and as for like a city, but you signed this little contract that you wouldn't plant any grass. And that's a very good rule among the desert. Roll or if you have to, put fine gravel. That's why I really like this little house. Almost all the houses have patch of grass and that has to be sprinkled. And then you've got damp grass. And if you really want to be healthy, if you come here for, wherever you lived that was damp, you don't want to sit and have someone sprinkle all the time. And he, Mr. Blankenhorn, adored the desert and all the things that went with the desert. I think you should put in verbena, just let it go along. Let the rains take care of it and things like that.

And those little yellow daisies, you know, the gold ones. And he was adamant about you better put his wash outside. I was surprised that Rancho Mirage did have some water trouble, I guess, last year, didn't they?

PY: Yes.

RW: But nothing compared to the other places. He looked into that pretty carefully. But I guess that was a rain to end all the rains. We had just sold our house and gone north the day before. (chuckle)

PY: Do you know who he purchased the property from in Rancho Mirage?

RW: No, that was, I don't think there were any Air Lands. As I remember he'd done that before I became interested in him or in the desert. And I couldn't tell you that. But I don't think Riverside County had very good records because otherwise they would have found out immediately what they owned. And when Mr. Tevis called on me several years ago, when he found out I had lived in Rancho Mirage, the first white woman you might say, why he said they were very confused, having trouble with Palm Desert. Of course, when we owned Rancho Mirage you couldn't possibly have troubles in Palm Desert because

it didn't exist. Not even a name in the road. And I'm confused about the bottom Green Riverside records didn't even show anything for a boundary. I said, well, I could not tell him from a legal angle or make a drawing of it, but I said I could tell him from a visual angle. So I went out with him and showed him, and they owned much more further boundary than they thought for. That was a little upsetting to Eisenhower Hospital, which had already been founded and occupied and their stationery printed, but most upsetting to Palm Desert. And it goes from point to another. One point north of the Chamber of Commerce, and one point go down the hill, the last bunch of rocks there before you get down to the level where you turn off for the College of the Desert.

PY: Did you say the Armstrongs lived out somewhere near, or they had their date ranch some . . .

RW: They lived there.

PY: Where?

RW: On the date ranch.

PY: Which was . . .

RW: Where the Eisenhower Hospital is, this huge date ranch. As I say, coming from New York City, they knew nothing about dates. I didn't know anything either except to

eat them. And there's quite a lot to learn about dates. They grow, but they take some care and watch out for frost and paper covering and everything. That all came later.

PY: What about, where there people on Clancey Lane at the time you moved to Rancho Mirage or named it?

RW: No one out there. Oh, there might have been a couple of Mexican shacks, you know, just sitters came along. As far as a home, there was nothing.

PY: How about the White Sun Guest Ranch or the Eleven Mile Ranch, was . . .

RW: Oh, that had never been thought of. They wanted me, they gave a dinner for the oldtimers and they heard about me, I guess. So Mr. Lazar, and I was very sorry I couldn't come. I was just out of the hospital after this knee operation. I wasn't even standing up outside of a walk, and I wasn't going to look like that out there, so I regretted. But I guess it was a very nice dinner. And they were going to honor me then. And I had been to the White Sun Ranch, never as a guest, but been in there. But that was the first ranch, but I mean paying ranch, you know, because we had no place a person could stay all night unless they happened to

be friends with somebody.

PY: When did that ranch start, do you know?

RW: Well, I think after we sold the property. I think after forty-three sometime. Because I was living in Pasadena. And it was nothing to take me down

PY: But there was nothing out where that ranch was?

RW: Oh, no. And I heard about it being built, but I didn't see it for several years after I came down here.

PY: I was curious, you said there were other names you had dreamed up besides Rancho Mirage.

RW: Well, I couldn't tell you now really. Oh, about like sky blue waters. I think Mr. McCumber had something about sky blue sands or something. He got the sky and the sands. That was the next course. I had nothing to do about the And Larry was sitting there. We were all eating lunch on the steps of this office. And he was the one that sat in the office. And I think he died a very short time ago. I read something about it. He was from Pasadena. And I think Mac Blankenhorn had known him as a boy. And he was a good salesman. He didn't mind the heat. And his little house was the second one built. He first slept in this

office thing. And right across the road a very tiny little house. I think it's been torn down, from the office. It was adequate. I think he was a grass widower. I'm not sure about that, but anyway, he lived there and very agreeable. And he'd take a hammer and do anything. It was really a very pleasant little life we had down there off and on. We didn't stay the whole weekend because there were two Blankenhorn girls, and I had two children.

We never came down over the weekend. We'd always come down on a Tuesday and go back Friday morning because the children's weekend was a busy one like all families.

PY: (chuckle)

RW: And we very seldom brought them down because they had their own friends and wasn't much for them to do, but later years when my son was in Cal Tech he came down and he'd bring another college boy with him and we'd put him to work. And they liked that. They'd strip and do a little painting or pounding around on some house.

PY: When did Don Cameron come along?

RW: He came along when we were building the Anza Road house, fairly early. You see, that was just off the road.

There was nothing in between the house and the road except the frontage property. Now you can't hardly find that house because there's something in front of it. And it's a dead end street. Was when we lived there. I think it made a turn around. But anyway, the post office was across the street. And he came along with a bandana with his stuff in it and a gob hat on his head. And he was always very fair. And he looked like a character out of somewhere. I was taking him, wanted to know if we had, I wasn't standing out there, but you want to know if we had a job for him. We happened to be there that week. And he was told that, well, we had a job for someone that wanted to work, you know. Because they're cheap enough. (chuckle) Because real workmen from the city, they weren't interested in coming down there. It was too speedy a thing for them. And they were more used to polished floors. And, of course, they never heard of building on cement slabs in the cities. Of course, now they do. Put in the plumbing first. So we got over plumbing when the plumbing came down. We brought a plumber from Benedict the first time. And he said, this isn't for me. I'm not going to lie my pipes out there. He

did do it on that one job, but out in the sand. The rain looked so improbable. But it always built a little basement. Not much in Pasadena, but enough so they put their pipes in. And, of course, must be why later on I saw nice little pane furnaces. We heated our houses with panel heat in the bathrooms and big fireplaces in the living room. Ours had a fireplace.

PY: So did you have electricity and gas out there?

RW: Beg pardon?

PY: Did you have utilities?

RW: We did have. By the time we'd gotten finished, we had electricity but not gas.

PY: Is that on the first house that you had electricity?

RW: Yes, electricity.

PY: Coming from Palm Springs?

RW: Well, it must have, overhead wires, I know, going on down to Indio. You see, Indio was a railroad center. I don't think any white person were earning a living there much. Those were Mexican villages. And the railroad people because it was where they, it was the next place after San Bernardino. They didn't really fix engines, but there was a switch yard there. And that old station burned several years ago. And so

that must be how we had the electricity. And, of course, Western Union was part of that, too. Went across the country. And there wasn't anything, no road, of course, across the valley that I've ever heard of.

PY: Do you mean going . . .

RW: Near that, like number ten.

PY: Oh.

RW: I don't remember anyone there. It came down from Whitewater down this way just hundred and eleven, but it wasn't called anything.

PY: Was it much of a road?

RW: Oh, just two lane all the way from Pasadena. Wasn't direct, I mean. We came out Foothill Boulevard out Pasadena, two lane all the road.

PY: How long did it take you?

RW: Oh, about three and a half hours. It was fairly smooth, but dirt two-thirds of the way. Dirt all the way from San Bernardino. We had to go through San Bernardino. Foothill Boulevard ended in San Bernardino. Then we dropped down and we were on the road that came to Whitewater. I suppose it was part of number ten. We followed the railroad tracks for a little ways. She

used a lot of shipping in those days. And Indio was much busier railroad I imagine it is now because that was a stop on the way to New Orleans. The trains were going through, a lot of them were full of people and freight and oranges, of course. No oranges out of California were allowed to come in, of course, until about twenty years ago.

PY: You mean they wouldn't bring other oranges into the state?

RW: No, be arrested, weren't allowed. Florida kept their orange groves, most of them, on the inner side of Florida, in the center, whereas we build everywhere in California and tore down orange groves. Very few orange ranches left. I mean as big places. Between here and San Diego, Redlands or Riverside, but after two or three years you drive by and sheets of condominiums are there instead of oranges.

PY: You were beginning to talk a little about Don Cameron. How did he become a realtor, for instance?

RW: How did he become a . . .

PY: He became a realtor.

RW: Well, he stayed on after he sold out. He was still doing odd jobs when we left. Mr. Blankenhorn died when

the army came in. I don't know where he was while the army was there. Probably working for somebody. Just a very lowly laborer, was what he was, very polite. But no education whatsoever that I could ever see. But not rude. He was a good worker and eventually other things. On the air. Better turn it off.

PY: (chuckle) I was going to ask you. You said when you sold that first house in four months, was that, how long had it taken to build? Are we talking about 1936

RW: We broke ground, I'd say, in, oh, about the first of July.

PY: In thirty-five.

RW: And we didn't do much because we went north where I had a summer home out in Tacoma. Went north for two months. And Ernie Behr sort of looked after it for a foundation and all that. And we had the plans all . . .

PAGE 2:

RW: There's a problem with their children. You know, build houses in Pasadena when I came down there. And all of type we're selling for top price then. And in all we built four hundred with two maids' rooms, maids' sitting

room, maids' breakfast room and butler's pantry and four bedrooms and four baths. Beautiful homes. They're still standing. I was taking some pictures along with David, one of my grandchildren, to know what we were doing in Pasadena beside our own two homes. We built two because we sold the first one. So I've been in building and lumber all my life.

PY: Was Ron Button one of the men who purchased property from you all in 1943?

RW: You mean Rancho Mirage?

PY: Yes.

RW: It was a development company. I can't even tell you the name. My attorney for the estate, you know, I just signed papers. Same with Mr. McCumber. He was still living. But there was no one, really, to be interested. So it went to a development company. And that's when it lost prestige. I said if it hadn't been for the war, you should always say what it would be if it hadn't been, if it hadn't been for the war and Mr. Blankenhorn dying and Mr. McCumber a very busy man, I think it would have been successful much faster because they were choosey, but then later it was anyone that wanted a house. And a lot of us trying to get it back like that.

Don't you?

PY: Oh, yes.

RW: That's very much.

PY: What was Mr. McCumber's full name? Do you remember?

RW: Laurence. Spelled with a U, I think, L-A-U. And he was a very delightful person. So was she, and they had two children. A daughter who was older; I never did see much of her because I imagine she stayed in school. They lived on one section, Iron Road next to Mr. first home. And I think he's from the east, but I haven't any idea about that.

PY: Oh, so he lived near Mr. Blankenhorn in Pasadena?

RW: In Pasadena. He also played tennis.

PY: Was he a real estate salesman?

RW: No, he was an attorney, as I remember. I didn't know him well. Didn't know him at all in Pasadena, but he was, I think he studied to be an attorney because he seemed to be able to draw up any papers. He was not a builder, but he was in real estate insurance, selling the homes more. They had a very attractive home, and he was right next to it, first home. Mr. Blankenhorn died.

PY: Were there any stores or anything commercial that had been built during the time that you owned it?

RW: Nothing. And that was quite a disappointment because

we had it laid out better than the next developer. We gave more space to it because I don't know any two men that want to beautify a thing as much as they did. And they were thwarted, really, because the depression sort of hit, you see. Had just in the midst of it in the war and people weren't looking to leave home when you couldn't, you really couldn't get gasoline. Only way in the world I could have gotten down here outside of a train, you know, get someone to bring me over from Indio was because I had this army order. And they asked me a couple of times, did I really have to go. I said, yes, because I closed the house and anything that made it look attractive I removed. And I don't mean of a great value, but not knowing when the war was going to be over. And a friend, a carpenter, who came down and charged me very low and boarded up the windows. You know, just with slats. So that's all we could do. That was the only thing I owned personally at the time. And we had a couple of houses under construction and they just stayed that way because building was frozen. And you can't go a hundred and some miles someplace that you can't get the gasoline. And when you got there, you had to come into town for

food. Of course, the army, that all went off to them. They had plenty. And that's when the El Mirador ceased being a hotel and made a hospital. And my daughter had two friends who unfortunately died at El Mirador when these jungle Two adorable young boys. They were both friends, too, and they'd gone through the jungles and they came home, and they didn't know how to treat it, I guess, even here. And a friend who had the about the second house in Palm Desert, Edna O'Reilly. And she was so worried about all this new influx. She'd came down there for her health and never lived anywhere else. And I guess she had to sacrifice her house in Palm Desert. It faced diagonal on a corner. And she worked every day. She had been taking nurses training during World War I. And so she had worked every day out here or every day down there until, oh, she said, it was ghastly because these boys had none of them been shot. That would have been easier. It's all this terrible jungle rot, this high temperature, you know. And she knew this one boy. I wasn't down here at the time, but she said it was the most tragic hospital you could imagine because mentally they were so alert. And, of course, nowadays

I suppose antibiotics and everything, would never happen.

PY: Yes.

RW: But just your feet just drop into pieces. And El Mirador was a hospital, I guess, four or five years because they thought this heat and all would be good, therapeutic. When I stayed at Desert Inn way back in twenty-three in an old cottage, a little stream came down. And the cottages are wound in, I don't mean anything with fish in. Little children guests would wade in it. And the dining room there, they were all frame houses, board and back, and the dining room was up a few steps. And it must have been warmer than it is now because the kitchens didn't have any windows in, just screens and Chinese cooks. And they show you, I thought it was a delightful spot to stay. And then in the evening, there was no living room. We had a little living room in your cottage, but we sat out and it wasn't Johnny but someone sang desert songs. And by this huge warm fire, building was open on three sides and screened. And I don't know when you could do that here now in the dead of winter. And we were out in our bathing suits, but none of them seemed to be cold.

Must have been balmier. And Ellie Kauffman ran it like a general. And she wore her hoover apron. And I'd never even seen one of those. World War I wrap arounds, everything. And she was a general, and she had a side later, many years later. We rented her, what she called her hideout house. She spent a summer in New England. And fascinated by those long white houses, two stories, those were, but this was one story. They just went on and on. Usually connected with the barn in New England. So you wouldn't freeze to death going to feed the animals. And she copied that and it was just right next to the Kauffman house. That was her son's house. And she'd been married before. Her husband died of TB. That's why she caught it in the first place. And right next to Mrs. Velour's was her granddaughter. And we were sandwiched in there with these houses next to Earl Kauffman's house. And Mrs. was her name. her first husband. And it was an adorable house. And she died the year before we rented it. And it hardly could be seen because that's what she wanted. And sycamores planted in there. It was planted like New England. Not planted like the desert

at all. But she didn't put in grass. We had the little pool. It was very pleasant. And we were just a half block from down at the oasis. And my children wanted it, and my grandchildren later did because they walked up to Allen. Of course, a child was safe anyway then. And my help adored her because they could shop and come back, run out again. (laughter) That was her hideout and no one in the desert. She never was around in the evening. I don't think she ever wore anything, maybe when she went to town sometimes with that She kept a summer home on Banning. She was quite a character. Like there's only one Shumann Hank or one Melba, there's only one Ellie Kauffman. And her granddaughter just bought a house back of where I live, the

PY: That's just what I talked to Betty about that. Yes.

RW: And when he came to see us one day after we bought this house in Smoketree, to sell some insurance. We didn't know him, and I didn't know any relationship with his name being different. And he said, you know these doorknobs in here, and it was a larger room than this, but it was old fashioned like this, he said, they're

solid brass. Well, they were very dull. I mean we had just bought it over there. And he said, I was an apprentice carpenter and I worked on this house in twenty-nine. And he said, I didn't know how to put on a doorknob. By the time I finished whole part of the house on that, so I got my, made busy, and they shone like amber. And I just thought they were just an old piece of metal. And everyone was attracted to them. I suppose these people now are quite modernistic, so maybe they've taken them off. But they shone just as much as if that was polished. That worries me, but I'm not going to polish it.

PY: (laughter) And one thing I wanted to ask you about Rancho Mirage. When did they put in those mailboxes, those rural mailboxes, you know, on Del Sol.

RW: Oh, they didn't have anything like that. They'd leave it at their office.

PY: At the little tract office.

RW: Yes.

PY: Was it coming from Indio? The mail.

RW: I couldn't tell you because I never had any mail there because we'd just be down three or four days at a time. I never stayed a whole week in succession because we

had our home in Pasadena. The McCumbers, but I don't remember any delivery or boxes or anything like that. But I do know the postman going by in his little yellow wagon when he left mail at the desk or business mail like contractors or woodwork and things that way because we bought out timber and things like that, our lumber, I know down at Indio. Of course, we had business mail coming for that, but I don't think anyone got any mail. Maybe the Proutys had some letters because he didn't stay all the time. They had some, it must have been her mother or somebody because he gave the property over to this older woman, stayed with that little boy. Because when I knew him, he didn't go to school. He was old enough, but he wasn't well. I understood he, he's forty years old now, probably healthy individual. But he's very weak looking little fellow. Nice old boy. Used to follow around, sort of bother the carpenters a bit.

PY: You were going to tell me, too, about the story your husband told me about the mine up in Magnesia Falls.

RW: Magnesia Falls? Well, I really don't know much about that because that was when he bought the land, that was one of the sort of come on gimmicks that they were

sure there was a mine up in there. But that's all I do know.

PY: Was that there was one there.

RW: And I don't know whether it was an Indian tale or what. We were about to develop there at the bottom there was some picnic tables because people coming to see the tract, you know. Didn't have flags flying, but we had signs up. And he was very fussy about the sign, too. Not to have a lot of signs all over the place. But you'd be surprised at the people that did come down. We advertised in the Los Angeles Times. But we advertised for a home, not just tracts. We didn't want to look like these places that are all going on that the government gave them, these homestead things out here in the desert, just looked like wood sheds. I suppose they had plumbing; I don't know. But they all disappeared and blown away, I guess. But a lot of those people trained here wanted to come back. The lowly soldiers are some. They just walked away, I guess, with the sands. But, oh, the desert was beautiful. I'm not one against progress, but you look over those verbena hills and the primroses. Oh, they were lovely. The yellow daisy. It was a mass of color like the

postcards used to be. But that's the way, I think, people should plant their front yards.

PY: Was there any restriction that said that they had to plant their front yards that way?

RW: There was here, but we didn't have enough people to really make restrictions, and none that we put palms. That's the only tree that could be planted. I think that's why there's so many palms there now.

PY: You're saying that McCumber and your Blankenhorn planted?

RW: Well, you can see the plantings in front of the Sahara House. Of course, they've never been trimmed. And we had, I think, an orange tree, grapefruit. And then we had palms that were like this, way up high. But I think that house has been mutilated more than any house I could imagine for being such a precious house. The rear was just as pretty. We had a lovely patio. My sister was there with us one day, and we had an earthquake. We were having lunch out on this patio with a little shelter roof and sort of lattice work, so you got And the whole valley, it was the funniest thing, I'd feel that cement move under. Not frightening, but just strange. And then, of course, part of the Never have thought of it in the desert in those days.

But oleanders were around. We planted some oleanders. But nothing, I don't think, was ever trimmed since 1934 or five. Doesn't look like it. And I saw the name on the mailbox one day, and I was curious enough to come home and look in the telephone book. It was owned by a policeman, I think named Johnson. I haven't been on that street for a long time. But it makes you sort of heartsick because we had this one driveway and our open-air garage, open at both ends, cover over it now. And the rear was as pretty as the front, our whole view. But what they've done to the rear looks like a stockade or something. And then we didn't have that closed front porch. They've glassed in the front porch. So cheesy looking. And the original lines you can see.

PY: Is this the house that's next to the house that was owned by the two old ladies, as you put it?

RW: No, the old ladies were down further, between us and the Morgans. When I sold the place, I don't mean in the Armstrongs, but the Prouty house and then came our house. And then there was nothing. And then came this hideous thing; it looked like it came down from Nebraska or something. A cottage, you know, real

cottage looking. And then Morgans

That was it. Upper side. And, of course, there was nothing in progress. We saw the whole desert as much as you would at Ironwood. We could see miles right across, nothing across there at all. And I know all that hodgepodge of buildings would never have been allowed. Now they're doing it. And I think that one like Mr. Lazar; isn't that lovely? You been in it? Oh, I went to see it one day. And I said, I don't need anything; I've sold my house. He thought I was losing my mind to move back to Tacoma. And we didn't want to be tied to our house in the winter.

We didn't really have anything to have us stay that long. Now we come for about two months and a half. We've had thirteen cruises, just Mr. Wheeler retires. Our daughter left last night. Sailed from

Fort Lauderdale.

PY: How many homes were there in Rancho Mirage?

RW: Well, I think there's sixteen. Unfortunately, no basements places because of the times with your pressure was more or less on throughout the nation. And then the war came.

PY: Can you talk a bit about Robert Ainsworth as your

architect there?

RW: Yes. He was a young architect. He came into our lives on our second house down there and built a home for us also in Pasadena. And he also wrote a very interesting story of early Pasadena. He wasn't of that age, but he wrote it as a paperback. And I have a copy of it up north. And he was a, not so high bound property you might say, Orson Van Pelt because they didn't like, every desert house had to be that one design. And you notice that the one below the road is not that at all. It's an adorable bungalow. In fact, I used the plans and gave them to a friend up north. It could be in any climate have to be more permanent built. And that has a delightful floor plan. As I say quite a change becoming a motel. And a top one at that.

PY: So what about Rancho Mirage? Were they Spanish names?

RW: Well, Sahara. Well, you know, I mean Egyptian, desert names. Not just rosebud or something. And our little piece was called Anza, and the army house was painted white with sort of yellow and green trim. And we planted those common yellow daisies that grow wild. We had a wild garden there of verbena. We watered it to get started and it was no trouble after that. And

I had two bedrooms and two baths. And the third bedroom was a garage, which probably didn't need that. When we brought help down, we didn't have company. Living room with an angle fireplace. It was just a precious bungalow. Didn't have the view that some of them did. Floor plan I liked a little bit better.

PY: Did you sell that home then as part of the development when you sold?

RW: Yes, that one part of it. Well, that's one that was rented to Pick. And, of course, after all that went in that's when it sold. You couldn't have sold anything at the time of Mr. Blankenhorn's death in forty-three where he lived in Pasadena or anywhere. The market was so poor and stocks were low. And the water was off. And Patton had the idea; of course, he was a Pasadena man. His grandfather was Wilson, Mount Wilson's named for. You know where the observatory is?

Pasadena. An old, old family. As old as the

And if we'd followed out Patton's idea of going on into Germany, we wouldn't have been caught so

because we were ready to finish it off. It would have been finished differently.

PY: Anything else that you can think of?

RW: No, I really can't. If I come across anything brilliant. (chuckle)

PY: Will you say that again?

RW: Well, in developing this, we never went into busloads of tourists coming down for free lunches or anything that way because we wanted to have a very definite class of development. And like La Quinta, wanted the same only La Quinta had the store.

They're over that now. But they just had to take anything anybody wanted to build a house. And beggers can't be choosers and when property was dropped so low and people just came individually. We did advertise several times in the Times, but not a tremendous ad to get the wrong type of people. But I'm sure Mr. McCumber and Mr. Blankenhorn would be delighted the way now it's come up for air in a different manner. And the palms they planted along the freeway there. And strange how it's become such an eating spot. And most of them are very good. And I think it's rather clever, like Las Feliz years ago was where you went for antiques. And then the property was too valuable, but I think they way they've put the restaurant chain there, and the set boxes they realized they had to have. Of course,

that was all originally in the deed. We never expected places like Mr. Lazar. It was going to be more of a home development.

PY: Are there any copies of that deed around? Do you know, of the original?

RW: That's where they had the trouble, you see. They couldn't find the . . . no, I suppose there was, but it never was in any of the papers that I went through.

PY: Were they of plans that you developed for the . . .

RW: The house plans, you mean?

PY: Yes.

RW: Yes, I had those. I had them north of our own houses, and the others were in the office, I suppose. I'll give them to the people who bought them.

PY: Or plans as to how the tract was going to be laid out with the street names?

RW: Yes. Yes. I remember seeing the blueprint of that. That was a home made affair.

PY: But you don't know where it is now?

RW: I have no more idea You know, at the time you don't think of anything like that. I doubt if half the cities could find the original blueprints because with all the different people that file. Well, I did have

the house parts of the ones we did. But as far as the plot plan, I have it just as plain in my head today as the day I remember doing the thing. I wasn't there laying out the roads, but I'd see just where. I could come back a hundred years and know that main part. As I say, Mr. Lazar was overcome when I said I sat right across the street there and named this.

PY: Had the roads on the other side of the wash been named as well? Like Del Sol. Did you name Del Sol or anything?

RW: No. Only road I know is the one we lived on, on the other side of the wash. Not the other side of the wash. I didn't know anything about the other side because we didn't own them.

PY: Oh, I see.

RW: Originally, the Armstrong Ranch, I think, was in this development. By the time Mr. Blankenhorn got the layout, the Armstrong Ranch was already going and had a real owner who sold out to this Mr. Armstrong.

PY: How far north did you go then? Beyond where your house was, say on

RW: You mean what?

PY: How far towards the wash did the original Rancho Mirage

tract actually go?

RW: Just to the wash.

PY: Just to the wash.

RW: That's right. And I guess it goes further than that now, of course.

PY: Yes.

RW: Well, it must have gone more than that because as I say this same, the that Mr. Blankenhorn bought. It must have been almost a tract then because they had told, it was all in the sales gone through the Armstrongs, this place where the Eisenhower Hospital is. Somebody must have owned it. I don't mean we, but whoever he bought the property from. Because the Armstrongs were part of that development. I don't mean they, themselves, but the owner because the date palms are up high. They weren't low. And they were just floored like coming into a, remember having a child coming into an orphanage and (chuckle) you carry on. She was very pretty. You are, too.

PY: Thank you.

RW: But she was, I don't think he ever would have gotten well. Maybe he never did get well. I don't know. I lost track of him. But they were so lonesome.

PY: I can imagine.

RW: And the slightest washout, they couldn't go anywhere.

PY: Did they have help out there?

RW: Yes, they had help. I don't think they brought it with them. I remember a little Spanish girl that they had. They decided to work some dates one day on a little truck. But it was all so foreign to them. And I think they took most of their dinners when they had the time up in Desert Inn. They had to see a little life.

PY: But what a trek, though.

RW: But of course, the desert was vast. See everywhere. And in laying out Smoketree Ranch, he insisted they have a view lot every fourth lot. And they can't ever be built So that makes it nice.

PY: It's still true today?

RW: The houses have to be twenty feet from their border line, so you see that's forty feet from the next house. That's a good thing. And as I say, you couldn't have any grass. Tamarisk trees, he planted all those, and he expected to take care of the fireplaces, which he would. We didn't have too many fireplaces. I don't mean the owners, the columnists. They're called columnists. And when we lived here several years ago

and rented a corner place about fifteen years ago, I guess, one winter, we had a grandson with us who was only eight. And they had a school on the ranch. Then the United States schools would take their child back, but they made a rule, public and private schools, although they went back sponsoring the average child because we had one teacher in a one-room schoolhouse. They came with their books prepared. And they never were backward when they joined it. Schools took a stand, not just against Smoketree. Every
So that stopped a lot of parents traveling. But children shouldn't be out of the school. We'd keep our grandson here. He never got off the grounds but once a month. We'd have him three months and have a haircut. They rode their horses. Stables were down there, and they rode horses on the ranch, but not in back. And one day he said the owners are called columnists. People who have homes here. And we were called ranchers, living here American plan. And renting. And we were ranches then at the time. And he said, "Grandmother, you cannot talk to those people beyond the double drive." And there was an elderly man who got to tinker around his house about a block away.

And he said he'd been so good to Clyde when he was hanging around there. And I said, "You won't talk to Mr. No, we can't because they're all communists. I said, you misunderstood;your teacher told you they were columnists. And he was only eight. "Grandmother, I know communists. And I'm never going to go across that road again." I got her to explain to him. I would close the door; we could hear the water running.

END OF INTERVIEW